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Viewing message <56luge$6on@bertrand.ccs.carleton.ca>

From: David F. Skoll (dfs@doe.carleton.ca)
Subject: How to make SURE a human is sending you mail (was Re: Random e-mails)
Newsgroups: news.admin.net-abuse.usenet
Date: 1996/11/17

View: Complete Thread (7 articles)
Original Format

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> On 15 Nov 1996 00:41:49 GMT, Brandon Hume <hume@isisnet.com> wrote:
> >
> >How is a program supposed to distinguish junk mail from mail that you
> >actually want?  What would your ISP's customers DO if they even HEARD
> >that they were filtering your email?  Nothing good, I assure you.
```

I've thought long and hard about this and have come up with a simple
solution which will stop spamming. All I need is the time to implement
it -- if someone else wants to do it, go ahead!

Here's the scoop: I want to make SURE a person is sending me e-mail
and not a computer. I distinguish three kinds of e-mail addresses:

1 - Trusted addresses -- these are addresses of friends or associates.
Mail from these addresses gets sent to my mailbox.

2 - Known bad addresses -- these are addresses which I know are used
by spammers. Mail from those addresses gets silently discarded.

3 - Unknown addresses. These are the tricky ones. When mail is received
from an unknown address, my autoresponder replies with a "puzzle." This
puzzle is a random challenge that is very easy for a human to respond
to, but next to impossible for a computer. For example, the reply
could look like this:

I apologize for the inconvenience, but due the prevalence of
spamming, I ask that you authenticate yourself as a human.
Please re-mail your message adding the following header:

    X-Not-Spam: xxxxx

replacing the "xxxxx" by the English name of the fourth month,
all in lower case.

Once again, I apologize for the inconvenience and trust that
you are understanding. Regards,

Of course, you need a file of many simple "puzzles" which are inserted
in the reply appropriately. The program keeps track of which puzzles have
been sent to whom, and only allows you to see mail from people who
successfully authenticate themselves. This is trivial for a person, but

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a nightmare for someone who wants to mass-mail thousands of people, each of whom has a different puzzle. After a couple of authentication failures, the program would mark the address as "bad" and discard mail from it, breaking potential bounce cycles.

Mail from "postmaster" is problematic -- you really might want to see messages about mail that you sent that has problems, but you don't want to simply allow all "postmaster" messages through -- spammers will simply fake that as their source address. So, you need to add a random string to all *outgoing* messages. If outgoing mail bounces, the mail system will include the message body (or at least the header). The program can verify that mail purportedly from postmaster contains the string and isn't unsolicited.

Of course, if you send mail to someone, you should include instructions for authentication to reduce the inconvenience for that person if he/she wishes to reply.

The advantage of this scheme over others is that most other junk filters allow the first message through and force you to manually remove spam addresses. This scheme treats all unknown addresses with suspicion, which makes it slightly inconvenient for legitimate users, but next to impossible for spammers to get through. It can be refined ad nauseum by adding timers to passwords, checking for addresses attempting mail bombing, etc...

Regards,

David.

P.S. I've deliberately set a bad reply-to address; I don't want to be mail-bombed for this! :-)

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